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A Moment of Crisis: Julius Schlosser, the History of Art as Style and the History of Art as Language

‘... es gibt keine “Kunst,” nur “Künstler” ’¹

‘There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists’²

Julius Schlosser (1866-1938) is now mainly remembered for his survey of historical writing on art published under the title *Die Kunstliteratur*.³ He was also author of one of the first histories of art collecting, and wrote one of the earliest outlines of the Vienna School of art history, an essay which has continued to shape understanding of the subject.⁴ He is additionally known as the teacher of a number of important art historians, such as Hans Sedlmayr (1896-1984), Otto Pächt (1902-88), Ernst Kris (1900-57) and, most notably, Sir Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001).⁵ More recently, too, he has gained critical attention for his highly inventive study of wax portraiture, a work that has prompted exploration of the idea of living presence and pictorial magic (‘Bildmagie’) in art and other mediums of visual representation.⁶

¹ J. SCHLOSSER, Ein Lebenskommentar, in: J. JAHN (ed), *Kunsthistoriker in eigener Darstellung*, Leipzig, 1924, p. 29.

² Sir E. H. GOMBRICH, *The Story of Art*, London 1984, p. 4

³ J. SCHLOSSER, *Die Kunstliteratur: ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna 1924.

⁴ J. SCHLOSSER, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens*, Leipzig 1908, and J. VON SCHLOSSER, *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte: Rückblick auf ein Säkulum deutscher Gelehrtenarbeit in Österreich. Nebst einem Verzeichnis der Mitglieder*, in: *Mittheilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, Ergänzungband*, 13.2, 1934.

⁵ See Gombrich’s obituary of Schlosser in: *Obituary: Julius von Schlosser*, in: *Burlington Magazine*, 74, 1939, pp. 98-99 and GOMBRICH, *Einige Erinnerungen an Julius von Schlosser als Lehrer*, in: *Kritische Berichte*, 16.4, 1988, pp. 5-9.

⁶ Schlosser’s study of wax portraiture was first published as *Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs: ein Versuch* in: *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, 29, 1910/11, pp. 171-258. It was translated as *History of Portraiture in Wax* in R. PANZANELLI (ed) *Ephemeral bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, Los Angeles 2008, pp. 171-314.

Schlosser often wrote on topics that fell beyond the domain of traditional art history; in addition to the works already listed one might mention, for example, his analysis of depictions of peasants and the poor ('Armeleutekunst'), his history of the collecting of musical instruments or his attempt to articulate a theory of art collecting.⁷ Many of these were tied to the professional duties of his museological career – he was curator of applied arts and musical instruments ('Waffen und Kunstindustrielle Gegenstände') of the Kunsthistorisches Museum for some 20 years – yet they attest to a willingness to probe the boundaries of what were then understood to be the concerns of art historians.

In many respects Schlosser was a typical Vienna School art historian, working on overlooked and unorthodox topics. Yet he differed from his peers in an important way, for there is no identifiable 'method' with which his name is associated. While most of his contemporaries wrote extensively on art historical method and produced major studies that exemplified their approaches, Schlosser rarely pronounced on the nature and purpose of art historical inquiry. One will search in vain for a definitive statement of method by Schlosser. Yet appearances can be deceptive, for he arguably raised far more pertinent questions about the nature of inquiry than many of his Vienna School peers. The difference lies in where one can find them being posed. Schlosser seldom wrote directly about art historical method: in his autobiographical 'Lebenskommentar' of 1924, in the later essay "Stilgeschichte" und "Sprachgeschichte" der bildenden Kunst' ('The History of Art as "Style" and the History of Art as "Language"') of 1935 and in a few scattered comments in his book-length study of medieval art.⁸ Yet his thoughts and doubts about the nature of art history left their mark on most of his writings.

This article is concerned with analysis of Schlosser's notion of 'method,' starting with the essay on style and language. Its aim is not merely to provide exposition and analysis of his arguments, but to identify and address the wider issues raised in this essay and in Schlosser's oeuvre as a whole. In particular, I argue that Schlosser raises philosophical questions about

⁷ J. SCHLOSSER, *Armeleutekunst alter Zeit* (1921), *Musikinstrumente der Vergangenheit* (1922) and *Zur 'Philosophie' des Kunstsammelns* (1925), in: SCHLOSSER, *Präludien: Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Berlin, 1927, pp. 304-19, 381-87 and 404-9.

⁸ J. SCHLOSSER, *Ein Lebenskommentar* (as in n. 1); *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1923; 'Stilgeschichte' und 'Sprachgeschichte' der bildenden Kunst' in: *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1935).

art historical method, about the relationship between aesthetic value and historical inquiry, that are still of central importance today. Exploring those may also bring into relief the purpose of inquiry into art history's past. What is to be gained from examining the ideas of art historians and critics writing nearly a century ago? Reflection on Schlosser's interventions into debate about art history may help to provide an answer to that question.

The History of Art as Language

Schlosser's theoretical reflections find their most extended form in the essay "‘Stilgeschichte’ und ‘Sprachgeschichte’ der bildenden Kunst." It is one of his most outspoken texts. At its heart is a critique of much of the art history of his time, yet it never offers a fully worked through argument; rather, it frequently makes bald assertions about the value of genius, the creative artist and artistic masterpieces. Its most striking feature is its polemical tone, which rests on the accusation that since Vasari most art historians have shown little interest in works of art as aesthetic artefacts and have instead been content to organise them into stylistic, thematic or formal categories. When they do, he notes: 'Das schon im Namen hybride Zwittergeschöpf der sog. Soziologie steckt dabei seine Eselsohren hervor: die Schematisierung der stets konkret-individuellen Tatsachen in Typen und Normen eines völlig abstrakten "Geschehens" in "Gesetzen", die sich letzten Endes fast immer als Plattheiten erwiesen.'⁹ The opposition drawn here between concrete 'facts' and abstract 'laws' might suggest he was attached to positivism, a tempting conclusion, given that the Vienna School was, for much of its history, shaped by positivistic notions of scholarship. However, this would misconstrue his point, for the criticism is part of a broader attack on art historians' fascination with 'pseudo-concepts' from the social and natural sciences. Positivism is not exempt from this attack, for in its place he asserts the primacy of aesthetic intuition as the basis for art history: 'Kunst, als einziges Objekt der ästhetischen Erkenntnis,

⁹ *The hermaphrodite of sociology, which already declares its hybrid nature with its name, pokes out its dog ears: it schematises what are always concrete individual facts into types and norms of a wholly abstract 'process' and into 'laws' that, ultimately, almost always turn out to be platitudes.* SCHLOSSER, 'Stilgeschichte' und 'Sprachgeschichte' der bildenden Kunst, pp. 22-23.

ist die erste und fundamentale Kategorie der theoretischen, betrachtenden Sphäre des Geistes vor und neben der logischen ...',¹⁰

When art historians describe art in terms of the laws it obeys, they lose sight of the individual work of art, he argues; it is either reduced to a brute material fact or it disappears in the universal and abstract world of scientific generalities. Schlosser was objecting to the way that, in the quest to make their discipline 'scientific,' in the construction of 'Kunstwissenschaft,' art historians in the German-speaking world had built an increasingly elaborate conceptual apparatus, usually centred on theories of vision and perception.¹¹ Schlosser's general criticism might have applied to any number of art historians of the first half of the twentieth century, from August Schmarsow (1853-1936) to Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), yet he had a more specific target in mind: Alois Riegl (1858-1905). For the latter's pioneering work of three decades earlier aimed at precisely what Schlosser set out to criticise. Above all, he coined the concept of the 'Kunstwollen' as a tool for the taxonomic ordering of artworks according to stylistic similarities and differences, based on the assumption that style was the collective expression of the development of modes of looking.

Schlosser's criticism was part of a longer critical engagement with the older scholar's legacy, all the more pertinent given that the later 1920s had seen a notable revival of interest in Riegl, led by Schlosser's own students.¹² Hence, Schlosser complained that in Riegl's writings the individual artwork disappears 'fast ganz hinter einem Dickicht oft abstrakter Psychologie.' Moreover, he, noted, even though Riegl questioned the aesthetic preferences governing the work of art historians – his attention to late Roman art being a prominent attempt to challenge prevailing views – he failed to pass through the door 'das zum Eigenwert des Kunstwerks selbst führt ...'¹³ In other words, Riegl was concerned with general aesthetic norms rather

¹⁰ *Art, as the sole object of aesthetic cognition, is the first and fundamental category in the domain of theoretical intuition in the mind, prior to and alongside that of logic, which corresponds to the two other domains of practical action, the economic and the ethical.* Ibid, p. 13.

¹¹ See M. B. FRANK AND D. ADLER (eds), *German Art History and Scientific Thought*, London, 2012.

¹² In 1927 Riegl's study of late Roman Art was republished as A. RIEGL, *Die Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Vienna, 1927, to be followed in 1929 by a collection of essays, A. RIEGL, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, (ed) K. SWOBODA, Vienna, 1929. Two years later his last major work, A. RIEGL, *Das Holländische Gruppenporträt*, ed. K. M. SWOBODA, Vienna, 1931, was also republished.

¹³ SCHLOSSER, *Ein Lebenskommentar*, p. 111 (... *the individual work of art almost entirely disappears behind a thicket of often abstract psychology*).

than with passing judgements on single objects. Schlosser voiced a similar criticism in his history of the Vienna School of 1934, published a year before the essay on style.¹⁴ It was no coincidence, Schlosser noted in that earlier essay, that Riegl often turned to periods in which the identity of artists was unknown, for this was structurally linked to his method of analysis, in which the creative work of individual artists was of secondary importance to the broader collective production of which it was merely an example.¹⁵ The work of art thus functions as a token or a symptom of something else and this is a criticism he makes, too, of art history as cultural history or ‘Geistesgeschichte.’¹⁶ In both, ‘die Abstraktion hat das Individuelle vergewaltigt, d.h. das wirklich Geschichtliche. Was individueller Ausdruck im eigentlichen und einzigen Sinn war, ist dadurch zum Ausdruckslosen in sich geworden: zu “Ausdruck” der nicht mehr Ausdruck ist, weil vom Individuum abgezogen und damit vernichtet ...’¹⁷

In contrast to this fetish of theory, Schlosser strongly advocates aesthetic engagement with the individual masterpiece and, even more, focusing on the genius of the creative artist. Using a metaphor borrowed from the Neo-Kantian philosopher Jonas Cohen (1869-1947), he characterises the artist as a ‘creative monad’ (schöpferische Monade) defined by his (and the gendered connotations are relevant here) insular nature (‘Inselhaftigkeit’).¹⁸ Consequently, ‘Der echte große Künstler ist als Künstler sich selbst genug, selbst “Publikum”, er bedarf und

¹⁴ *Today, we believe to recognize that this sort of thing is possible within the logical sphere of thoughts, as shown brilliantly in Windelband, History of Philosophy, but not, or only very conditionally, within that of aesthetics. This would annihilate the individual and the personal element, which provides the very basis of the discipline, just as the physicist or chemist has no need for the individual object, which is merely an exponent of the ‘laws’ which they study.* J. SCHLOSSER, *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*, p. 191.

¹⁵ SCHLOSSER, *Die Wiener Schule der Kunstgeschichte*, p. 191.

¹⁶ Schlosser also suggested that it a certain aesthetic insensitivity lay behind this phenomenon, ‘Denn ein Kunstwerk intellektuell zu analysieren, auf eine Formel zu bringen, fällt den meisten leichter als es zu erleben’ (*Most of them find it easier to analyse a work of art intellectually, to reduce it to a formula, than to experience it*), SCHLOSSER, *Lebenskommentar*, p. 109.

¹⁷ *... abstraction has violated the individual, i.e. that which is truly historical. Individual expression, in its authentic and only sense, has thereby become devoid of expression in itself. It has become an ‘expression’ that is no longer expression, because it has been torn from the individual and thereby annihilated.* SCHLOSSER, ‘Stilgeschichte’ und ‘Sprachgeschichte’ der bildenden Kunst, p. 24.

¹⁸ Schlosser attributed the term ‘Inselhaftigkeit’ to Cohen, but it was in wider currency in aesthetic thinking. In his book on Rembrandt, Georg Simmel referred to the ‘Inselhaftigkeit des fertigen Kunstwerks.’ SIMMEL, *Rembrandt: Ein Kunstphilosophischer Versuch*, Leipzig 1917, p. 11.

denkt dessen nicht.’¹⁹ Consequently, Schlosser has little time for analysis of the relation between the artist and their social and cultural milieu, an approach characteristic of ‘Geistesgeschichte’; such an approach leads into the maze of sociology (‘in den soziologischen Irrgarten’).²⁰ In keeping with this idea Schlosser also distances himself from the idea of a history of *Art*. In its place, he argues, there should be a history of *artists* (‘Künstlergeschichte’), a notion he had first introduced some ten years earlier in his ‘Lebenskommentar.’ Schlosser thus valorises the artist as the point of absolute origin, and is also critical of attempts to discern artistic influence: ‘Und da hat Whistler Recht ... daß die Vorgeschichte dieser Monade, ihrer Schulung im Grunde ebensowenig zu ihrem inneren Wesen, ihrer wahren Geschichte gehört wie ihre Nachgeschichte, ihre Wirkung auf andere, ihres Einflusses.’²¹ Artists may be engaged in a dialogue with each other, but this does not amount to one influencing another, for this would minimise their creative originality: ‘Das Wort, daß Michelangelo “donatellisiere,” ebenso wie Donatello “buonarrotisiere” taucht schon ... Aber selbst bei einem, wie Mozart, so leicht und rasch Aufnehmenden und Assimilierenden ist die eigene Physiognomie schon in frühesten Tagen kenntlich und unverkennbar ... Darum sind alle die Einflußtheorien leere Hülsen ...’²²

Few art historians have given this proper recognition, he argued, naming Roberto Longhi (1890-1970, Friedrich von Rintelen (1881-1926) and Wölfflin as exceptions to this pattern. These references merit discussion. Longhi was highly attentive to the aesthetic qualities of individual artworks and already by the 1930s had developed the poetic rhetoric of description – *ekphrasis* – for which he was later renowned.²³ Rintelen’s 1912 monograph on Giotto, which Schlosser singled out for commendation, does not have Longhi’s linguistic flare, but when, in the methodological Foreword, it argues for an art history that attends to the

¹⁹ *The truly great artist is self-sufficient; he is even his own public and gives it no thought.* SCHLOSSER, ‘Stilgeschichte’ und ‘Sprachgeschichte’ der bildenden Kunst, p. 15.

²⁰ *The microcosm does not carry in itself the macrocosm ... Giotto should not be understood as the expression of his age (Rosenthal) but rather his age as the expression of Giotto (Rintelen).* Ibid, p. 23.

²¹ *Whistler is correct on this point ... that at base the pre-history of this monad and its schooling belongs as little to its inner being, its true history, as does its posthistory, its impact on others, its influence.* Ibid, p. 17

²² *The argument often surfaces that Michelangelo was ‘donatelloesque’ or that Donatello was ‘michelangeloesque’ ... but even with someone like Mozart, who borrowed and assimilated with such facility and speed, his own physiognomy was visible and unmistakeable at the very beginning ... For this reason, all theories of influence are empty husks.* Ibid, pp. 17-18

²³ Schlosser mentions LONGHI, Piero della Francesca, Rome, 1927).

specificity of the subject, Rintelen had adopted a tenet entirely in keeping with Schlosser's own view.²⁴ More puzzling is the inclusion of Wölfflin, for the Swiss art historian was, and continues to be, most commonly identified with the broad categories (or principles) of art historical analysis that Schlosser most criticised.²⁵ Instead, it is Wölfflin's monograph on Dürer that Schlosser cites, a quite uncharacteristic work that attempts to describe the *individual* style of the artist.²⁶

With this emphasis on individual creative originality Schlosser claimed that the history of art is not a linear process where art develops in a law-like and constant progression; instead it makes creative leaps ("natura facit saltus").²⁷ This inversion of Leibniz's original assertion ("natura *non* facit saltus") is significant not so much for the link to the German thinker – or even to Carl Linnaeus, who first rendered Leibniz's French original into Latin. Rather, it is of relevance for its role as a key leitmotif in evolutionary theory – which was received with great enthusiasm in Germany and Austria, not least by art historians.²⁸ In the place of an incremental history of art, Schlosser argued, one should think in terms of the dialogue between original geniuses across the centuries. Drawing on a metaphor from Schopenhauer, but using a rhetoric that might not look out of place in the pages of Nietzsche, Schlosser writes of the spiritual dialogues ('Geistesgesprächen') between heroes above the noise of

²⁴ Rintelen notes, 'Es schien mir dabei, dass die gute Geschichtsschreibung nicht darauf aus ist, alle möglichen Aspekte ihres Gegenstandes zu geben und dass sie noch weniger die Auflösung des Charakters der einzelnen Phänomene in allgemeinen "entwicklungsgeschichtlichen" Begriffen duldet, sondern dass sie den gegebenen Stoff unter einigen wesentlichen Gesichtspunkten nach seiner Besonderheit und seiner Bedeutung mit aller möglichen Intensität ins Licht zu stellen sucht.' (*In this connection it seemed to me that good art history writing is not out to provide all possible aspects of its objects; even less does it tolerate dissolution of the character of individual phenomena into general 'historical and developmental' concepts. Rather, it seeks to shine light on the specifics and significance of its given subject from a few essential perspectives with as much intensity as possible*). F. RINTELEN, *Giotto und die Giotto-apokryphen*, Munich 1912, p. 1.

²⁵ H. WÖLFFLIN, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Munich 1915.

²⁶ H. WÖLFFLIN, *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers*, Munich, 3rd edition, 1919. See in particular the chapter 'Allgemeines zur Stilbestimmung' (pp. 294-302).

²⁷ SCHLOSSER, 'Stilgeschichte' und 'Sprachgeschichte' der bildenden Kunst, p. 23.

²⁸ For the original, "La nature ne fait jamais de sauts" see G. LEIBNIZ, *Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement Human*, Paris, 1921, p. 17. C. DARWIN, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, London, 1859, p. 194. For a critical discussion see M. RAMPLEY, *Memes and Trees: Art History as Evolution*, in: RAMPLEY, *The Seductions of Darwin: Art, Evolution, Neuroscience*, University Park, PA, 2017, pp. 44-72.

everyday life below in the valleys ('über den Lärm des Alltags unten in den Tälern.').²⁹ In other words, Schlosser had in mind an ecology of art based on the division between creative masters (and in this patriarchal model they *are* 'masters') occupying the lofty heights, and lesser artistic mediocrities. With this metaphor we begin to approach the meaning of the distinction between art history as 'Stilgeschichte' and art history as 'Sprachgeschichte.'

Art as Style and Art as Language

Little has been said so far about the key terms of the title: style and language. These reflect Schlosser's engagement with the Neo-Idealist Aesthetics of his contemporary Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and the Romance linguist and literary historian Karl Vossler (1872-1949), who applied Croce's ideas to the theory of textual interpretation and criticism.³⁰ It is due above all to Schlosser's immersion in Vossler's linguistic theory that he chose to frame the debate about the nature of art historical interpretation in terms of the opposition between style and language, or between 'Stilgeschichte' and 'Sprachgeschichte.'

Language and linguistics became an object of interest for researchers in a growing number of humanities disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³¹ Amongst art historians the best known example, perhaps, is Aby Warburg's reference to Hermann Osthoff's notion of linguistic 'suppletion.'³² Schlosser's turn to Vossler fits into this context, but in adopting the latter's linguistic models he altered the meaning of the term 'style' as it had traditionally functioned in art history. For Riegl, Wölfflin and others 'style' functioned as an instrument of taxonomy. 'Style' was what works of art had in common, what enabled meaningful comparisons to be made between them, what enabled broader conclusions about the trajectory of art to be drawn, and what enabled art historians, in endowing visual analysis

²⁹ SCHLOSSER, 'Stilgeschichte' und 'Sprachgeschichte' der bildenden Kunst, p. 19.

³⁰ On the relationship between Croce and Schlosser see R. DE MAMBRO SANTOS, *Viatico Viennese: La storiografia critica di Julius von Schlosser e la metodologia filosofica di Benedetto Croce*, Rome, 1998.

³¹ A. GUILLEMIN, *The Style of Linguistics: Aby Warburg, Karl Vossler and Hermann Osthoff*, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69.4, 2008, pp. 605-26.

³² H. OSTHOFF, *Vom Suppletivwesen der indogermanischen Sprachen*, Heidelberg, 1899. Warburg's use is described in GUILLEMIN, *op. cit.* and C. JOHNSON, *Memory, Metaphor and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Ithaca, 2012, pp. 136-40.

with greater conceptual rigour, to challenge the suspicion that their discipline was little more than a dilettantish exercise in art appreciation. Yet historically, the *stilus* was the writer's instrument and it was linked to the body and the personal expression of the individual writer, thus serving as a metaphor for individual creative identity.³³ As a result the term embodied two contradictory ideas for, as David Summers has noted, 'Style is radically-and properly-object and expression oriented, and at the same time it seems to promise generalizations of almost any degree of inclusiveness.'³⁴ Art historians at the turn of the century privileged style as a normative category whereas Schlosser revived the older notion of style as the rhetorical expression of the individual. In this he was informed by Vossler's rendering of the term.

In his short tract of 1904, *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft*, dedicated to Croce, Vossler distinguished between two approaches to linguistics on the basis of their understanding of what he termed the causal principle ('Kausalitätsprinzip') of a language, in other words, the basis on which meaning is generated. As the title suggests, he defined these approaches as Idealist and Positivist, and described the difference as follows: 'Der Idealist sucht das Kausalitätsprinzip in der menschlichen Vernunft, der Positivist sucht es in den Dingen, in den Erscheinungen selbst.'³⁵ For the Idealist, therefore, meaning is generated by the intentional agency of the speaking subject while for the Positivist it lies in the formal structures and rules of the language. Vossler identified himself as an Idealist and strongly argued that the subjectivity of the individual speaker was the determining factor. In the analysis of textual meaning one should therefore proceed inductively, 'vom Einzelfall zur Konvention. Nicht umgekehrt.'³⁶ Style is a matter of personal expression ('Stil = individueller geistiger Ausdruck'), and Vossler distinguished between an idealistically based 'Stilistik' and the positivistic documenting of the syntactical, morphological and grammatical rules of a language, which he dismissively referred to as mere philology ('denn immer ist und

³³ W. SAUERLÄNDER, From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion, *Art History*, 6.3, 1983, pp. 253-70.

³⁴ D. SUMMERS, Conventions in the History of Art, *New Literary History*, 13.1, 1981, p. 107.

³⁵ *The idealist looks for the causal principle in human reason, the positivist looks for it in the things, in the phenomena themselves.* K. VOSSLER, *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft*, Heidelberg 1904, p. 3.

³⁶ *From the individual case to convention. Not the other way around.* Ibid, p. 16.

bleibt Stilistik das α und ω der Philologie'³⁷). It was not that philology had no role at all, but Vossler's point was that it should serve only as a preliminary to the central task, stylistics.

The central figure in this model is the creative speaker, who not only follows the rules of the language, but is constantly and creatively reshaping the language. To give priority to the language as a system, Vossler argued, was to view the speaker as merely parroting it, rather than speaking it: 'Nachsprechen ist Sache des Papageis. Dafür hat der Papagei aber auch keinen Stil, und ist kein Sprachzentrum.'³⁸ Vossler's linguistic theory was a reworking of ideas from Croce's *Aesthetics*, published only two years earlier.³⁹ Guided by the axiom of the identity of art with intuition ('conoscenza intuitiva') Croce distinguishes between those 'historical labours' ('lavori storici') that view the work of art from a purely external point of view as a historical document, and art and literary history, which combines such an approach with aesthetic criticism of the internal properties of the work. Individually, each of these procedures is incomplete:

Scholarship directed simply at clarifying the intelligibility of a work of art, aims simply at making a certain internal fact, an aesthetic reproduction, stand forth. Artistic and literary history, on the other hand, can only arise after this reproduction has been secured and implies work additional to that.⁴⁰

For Croce, undertaking the historical study of art consequently involves three stages: (I) establishing the historical place of the work of art; (II) aesthetic reproduction of the spirit of the art, and (III) a synthesis of these two. It is this that distinguishes the historian from the mere aesthete or what Croce terms the 'man of taste' ('uomo di gusto').⁴¹ With 'aesthetic reproduction' ('riproduzione estetica') Croce meant retrieval of the artwork's poetic qualities set against the horizons in place at the time of its creation, and its only through combining

³⁷ *For stylistics is and always will be the alpha and omega of philology.* Ibid p. 24.

³⁸ *Repetition is the business of the parrot. For this reason, the parrot has no style and is not a linguistic node.* Ibid. p. 38.

³⁹ B. CROCE, *Estetica come scienza dell' espressione e linguistica generale*, Bari 1908.

⁴⁰ 'L'erudizione, rivolta a rischiare l'intelligenza delle opere d'arte, mira semplicemente a far sorgere un certo fatto interno, una riproduzione estetica. La storia artistica e letteraria non nasce, invece, se non dopo che tale riproduzione sia stata ottenuta; e importa, dunque, un lavoro ulteriore.' Ibid, p. 149.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 150.

such ‘reproduction’ with the process of historical documentation that the *historically relevant* aesthetic properties can be identified (in contrast to those that are a mere projection of the modern spectator).

The challenge of this task was amplified, for Croce, by the singularity of the work of art and the challenges this presents for the construction of art historical narratives. The history of science, he argued, consists of a unitary linear progression, for ‘science is the universal and its problems are gathered together in a vast system.’⁴² Works of art are, in contrast, the product of individual intuition, and individuality does not repeat itself. While the history of art does show cycles of progression, it presents a plurality of incommensurable individual works of art. This relativistic position also led him to defend the value of primitive art:

Not only is primitive art not inferior ... but every individual, every monument of the spiritual life of an individual, is a self-contained artistic world; and these worlds cannot, artistically, be compared with one another.⁴³

He then applied this understanding to the specific case of Renaissance art, criticising the traditional view that it represented an advance over medieval art or served as evidence for progress of art. This orthodox view disregards the individual agency of artists, he claimed, and tends to see them as tinkering with or improving what had gone before, but little else. Yet the difference between Giotto and later artists was not a matter of artistic progression from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century; instead, it lay in the singularity of their respective aesthetic visions. Giotto ‘was not able, certainly, to draw a body like Raphael or colour it like Titian: but were Raphael or Titian able to create the *Marriage of St. Francis with Poverty* or *The Death of St. Francis* as Giotto was?’⁴⁴ Indeed, Croce claimed, rather disingenuously,

⁴² ‘La scienza è l’universale, e i problemi di essa sono collegati in un unico vasto Sistema.’ Ibid, p. 155.

⁴³ ‘Non solo l’arte dei selvaggi non è inferior ... ma ogni individuo, anzi ogni momento della vita spirituale di un individuo, ha il suo mondo artistico; e quei mondi sono tutti, artisticamente, incomparabili tra loro.’ Ibid, p. 156.

⁴⁴ E vi ha, per esempio, chi si propone di rappresentare l’infanzia dell’arte italiana in Giotto, e la maturità di essa in Raffaello o in Tiziano; quasi che Giotto non sia compiuto e perfettissimo ... Egli non era in grado, certamente, di disegnare un corpo come Raffaello o di colorirlo come Tiziano; ma erano forse in grado, Raffaello o Tiziano, di creare il Matrimonio di San Francesco con la Povertà, o la Morte di San Francesco?’ Ibid, p. 157.

the distinctiveness of Giotto's work lay in the fact that had a conscious disregard for the idealising body so central to later Renaissance art.

This claim does not, of course, hold water; Giotto did not have the gift of foresight and could not possibly have anticipated how art would develop a century and a half later, much less actively decide to resist its aesthetic norms. Yet it is notable that Schlosser, who frequently expressed his admiration for Croce (and Vossler) would later come to repeat this argument almost verbatim; hence, the measure of the work of art lies in itself and not in its relations to others. Categorising it according to genre, School or period, for example, involves the application of an arbitrary apparatus *external* to the work.⁴⁵

Understanding Schlosser's intellectual debt to Croce and Vossler also helps clarify various other claims he made. For just as Vossler sought to counter a reified notion of language by making the speaking subject the central object of investigation, so Schlosser's focus on the artist can be read not merely as an outdated romantic reaction, but as a tactic for resisting the reification of art as a category. Hence, he argued in his autobiographical 'Lebenskommentar' that:

die 'Kunst' ist ... keine 'Institution', die ihr vergängliches 'Leben' hat, geboren wird, wächst und abstirbt, wie Staat, Kirche, Gesellschaft, Recht in zeitlich bedingten Formen, sie ist ein Ewiges wie der Menschegeist selbst, stete Gegenwart, und unter jener Metapher der Kunst geht es stets um den Menschen, in diesem Fall den künstlerisch schaffenden Menschen als Einzelwesen.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ 'jedes echte Kunstwerk trägt, wie der ideale Künstlerpersönlichkeit, die es in sich schließt, einen Maßstab in, nicht außer sich, und alle Versuche, jene in Richtungen und Gattungen einzufangen, bleiben schematisch, Gerüst, praktische Nomenklatur' (*.. just like the artist who encompasses it, every genuine work of art contains its standards within it and not externally, and all efforts to place it into tendencies and genres remain schematic, a scaffolding, a practical matter of naming*). SCHLOSSER, Ein Lebenskommentar, p. 130.

⁴⁶ Art is .. not an institution that has a transient life, is born, grows and dies away in temporally determined forms, like the state, the church, society, the law. It is a constant, just like the human spirit, and with this overarching metaphor of art we are always concerned with human beings, in this case, artistically creative human beings, as individuals. Ibid, p. 32.

Likewise, talk of the ‘language’ of art is dealing with an abstract construct, which, if made the *centre* of investigation, could be mistaken for a real phenomenon. Schlosser does admit the *possibility* of writing about the language of art, i.e. the common histories and patterns of the art of a particular time or place; he published a book on medieval art that exemplified just such an approach.⁴⁷ But he remained highly sceptical. The methodological introduction to the book contains a curious disavowal of the whole project. One can identify the language of medieval art, he argued, but only on condition of subtracting the most important element: the creative artist.

wohl aber lässt sich aus bestimmten wissenschaftlich-praktischen Gründen Kunst wie Sprache von einem anderen Gesichtspunkte aus betrachten ... unter Abstraktion von dem eigentlich und einzig Bestimmenden, Individuell-Schöpferischen als die Summe alles dessen, was dann übrig zu bleiben und in gewissen Perioden allen Werken des Ausdrucks, guten, mittelmässigen, wie schlechten, Originalen wie Ableitungen, zu eignen scheint, des sogen. Zeitstils.⁴⁸

Embedded in this assertion is also a hierarchy of values linked to the emphasis on genius; for Schlosser made a Kantian distinction between those works that simply reiterate formulae, styles and motifs in the continuation of a tradition, and those ‘genuine’ works of art that transcend such everyday practices. As he later wrote in the essay on language:

Wohl arbeitet jeder Denker, ist er nur wirklich ein Schöpfer, an seinen ihm innerlich zugehörlichen Problemstellungen; darin scheint er dem schaffenden Künstler zu gleichen, der seine Probleme nicht als toten Stoff weiterschleppen darf, sondern sie als gegenwärtig erleben muß, dadurch, daß sie, sein geschichtliches Erbe, in ihm ‘aufgehoben’, d.h. überwunden werden, umgestaltet, seinem Sinn und seiner Sendung gemäß, womit tatsächlich etwas Neues und eben darum Weiterwirkendes entsteht.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ J. SCHLOSSER, *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* (as in n. 8).

⁴⁸ *For sure, art can, for practical scholarly reasons, be viewed as a language by abstracting from the only genuine element, individual creation, by presenting the sum of everything left over, that appears to be common to all expressive works in certain periods, the good, the mediocre and the bad, original as well as derivative: so-called period style.* Ibid, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Every thinker, as long as he is genuinely creative, works on his own inner set of problems; in that respect he is like the creative artist, who does not haul his problems along like some dead material, but must experience*

The Kantian tenor of this opposition was specific to Schlosser, but its immediate sources were, again, Vossler and Croce, both of whom distinguished between poetic and everyday uses of language or, in the case of Croce, between poetry and non-poetry.⁵⁰

It is important to note what Schlosser meant by ‘artist,’ too, for he distinguished between the empirical historical person of the artist and the artist *qua* author of the work of art. Art history had confused the two, he argued, and artistic monographs have tended to focus on extrinsic biographical facts, even gossip, instead of the artist as aesthetic principle. This conflation had started early. Thus, Lorenzo Ghiberti, whose *I Commentarii* (1447-55), Schlosser himself edited and published, had understood the distinction between the two, but in the *Lives of the Artists*, written only 50 years later, Vasari was already being drawn towards anecdote and historical detail.⁵¹ Consequently Schlosser was highly critical of Vasari on numerous occasions for what he regarded as his baleful influence on the subsequent course of art historical writing.⁵² Instead, he argued, the point of departure should be the person of the artist as an *ideal* construct; citing a much debated example, Schlosser suggested that it is irrelevant whether the *empirical* author of the Folio edition was Shakespeare or Francis

them as significant for the present and remodels them, ‘sublating’ i.e. overcoming his historical inheritance, in keeping with his own meanings and mission, so that something new and effective comes into existence.

SCHLOSSER, ‘Stilgeschichte’ und ‘Sprachgeschichte,’ p. 26

⁵⁰ B. CROCE, *Poesia e nonpoesia: Note sulla letteratura europea del secolo decimono*, Bari 1923. As Vossler also noted in his critique of positivist grammarians, ‘die Grammatik ist eine Botanisiertkapsel, und die Sprache ist ein endloses grünendes Land von Gewächsen’ (... *grammar is the specimen jar of the botanist, while language is an infinite land of flourishing plants*). VOSSLER, *Sprache als Schöpfung und Entwicklung*, Heidelberg 1905, p. 50.

⁵¹ J. SCHLOSSER, *Lorenzo Ghibertis Denkwürdigkeiten (I Commentarii)*, Berlin 1912, 2 Vols; G. VASARI, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori*, Florence 1550.

⁵² ‘Stilgeschichte ... geht um die “Biographie”, d.i. die innere (nicht äußere, Geschichte der “inselhaft” schöpferischen “Monade”, wie schon der alte Ghiberti geahnt hat, sogleich mißverstanden von seinem (bis heute, viel einflußreicher gewordenen Nachfolger Vasari, dem eigentlichen “Vater” der europäischen Kunstgeschichte nochmehr in schlimmem denn in gutem Sinn.’ *The history of style ... is concerned with ‘biography’, i.e. the inner (not outer, history of the ‘insular’ creative ‘monad,’ which old Ghiberti had intimated, but which was immediately misunderstood by his successor Vasari, who became much more influential (until today), more negatively than positively, as the true ‘father’ of European art history.* SCHLOSSER, ‘Stilgeschichte’ und ‘Sprachgeschichte,’ p. 13. See, too, Schlosser’s lengthy account of Vasari in *Die Kunstliteratur*, pp. 251-304.

Bacon. The object of attention should be the author-figure 'Shakespeare.' With this last claim Schlosser strayed into the philosophy of the subject, and his framing of the question of the artist in this way reveals not only his debt to Croce and Vossler but also his schooling in Romantic aesthetics, specifically, the work of Schelling.⁵³ Before addressing the wider philosophical questions this raises, however, it is worth exploring some of the internal contradictions that are brought into sharp relief by his methodological polemic.

Critical Issues

With its elitist notions of genius and dismissive attitude towards much art historical writing, Schlosser's vision initially comes across as an unsympathetic and reactionary tirade against some of the most progressive thinking in the discipline. While he made a number of assertions about the primacy of the singular genius, Schlosser did merely *assert*, without presenting worked-through arguments. Yet rather than expecting a fully formed theoretical position, we might better understand Schlosser's claims, especially those in the article on language and style, if we see in them glimpses of a set of recurring preoccupations that surfaced in other writings, too. Indeed, the article on style and language is a response to problems that Schlosser openly admitted he had wrestled with through his career. In his autobiographical sketch he referred to the '... auf meine lange Jahre hindurch gewälzten Fragen, was ist Kunst?, was Geschichte?, wie ist die Geschichte der Kunst möglich?'⁵⁴ In this he was no less critical of himself than he was of others, for, as he admitted: 'Jahrelang hatte ich als 'Philolog', 'Grammatiker,' 'Kulturhistoriker', die einzelnen Kunstwerke ... als 'Urkunden' benutzt, ohne mich recht zu fragen, wie beschaffen sie denn seien, ob ich denn überhaupt ein Kunstwerk vor mir habe oder nicht.'⁵⁵

Here Schlosser comes across as a much more reflective figure. His concern for the preservation of aesthetic distinction can also be seen as an instance of a broader conservative cultural critique common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His reference to

⁵³ SCHLOSSER, *Ein Lebenskommentar*, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁴ ... *the questions that I pored over during my many years: what is art? what is history? how is the history of art possible?* Ibid, p. 29

⁵⁵ *For years, as a 'philologist', a 'grammarian', a 'cultural historian', I had used individual works of art ... as 'documents', without truly reflecting on their character, on whether I even had a work of art before me or not.* Ibid. p. 34.

geniuses on mountain tops was not only Nietzschean in tone, it also echoed the philosopher's attacks on the desiccated nature of German scholarship.⁵⁶ Nietzsche had bemoaned the fact that 'man triumphiert darüber, dass jetzt "die Wissenschaft anfangs über das Leben zu herrschen": möglich, dass man das erreicht; aber gewiss ist ein derartig beherrschtes Leben nicht viel wert, weil es viel weniger Leben ist und viel weniger Leben für die Zukunft verbürgt, als das ehemals nicht durch das Wissen, sondern durch Instinkte und kräftige Wahnbilder beherrschte Leben.'⁵⁷ Schlosser may have privileged artistic creativity in place of the Nietzschean preoccupation with life and instinct, but his attacks on 'Kunstwissenschaft' articulate a similar criticism. He also dismissed, for example, the 'Attribuzlerei' ('mania for making attributions') of many art historians, which amounted to little more than 'tote Erudition'.⁵⁸ Such a parallel is all the more sustainable in the light of Diana Reynolds-Cordileone's recent analysis of the recurrent interest in Nietzsche's cultural criticism amongst art historians.⁵⁹

We may begin to gain a more nuanced sense of Schlosser's essay – and of his thinking more generally – if we return to his autobiographical 'Lebenskommentar.' It is prefaced with a photograph of him cradling a small sixteenth-century Florentine bronze of Hercules (Schlosser thought it was of Cain) from the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Figure 1), where he had been curator.⁶⁰ The text was published in a volume of testimonies

⁵⁶ F. NIETZSCHE, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben, in: NIETZSCHE, Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen. Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe. (ed.) G. COLLI and M. MONTINARI, Munich and New York 1988, 1, pp. 242-334.

⁵⁷ *There is indeed rejoicing that now 'science is beginning to dominate life': that condition may, possibly, be attained; but life thus dominated is not of much value because it is far less living and guarantees far less life for the future than did a former life dominated not by knowledge but by instinct and powerful illusions.* Ibid, p. 298. English translation from NIETZSCHE, Untimely Meditations, trans. R. HOLLINGWORTH, Cambridge 1997, p. 97.

⁵⁸ SCHLOSSER, Ein Lebenskommentar, p. 117.

⁵⁹ D. REYNOLDS-CORDILEONE, Alois Riegl in Vienna, 1875-1905: An Institutional Biography, Farnham 2014. See in particular 'Nietzsche as Educator' (pp. 25-48).

⁶⁰ Schlosser attributed the work to Vincenzo Danti (1530-76) but its authorship is in dispute. M. LEITHE-JASPER, Renaissance Master Bronzes from the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Washington 1986, pp. 153-55. Schlosser wrote about the figure in SCHLOSSER, Werke der Kleinplastik in der Skulpturensammlung des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses, Vienna 1910, p. 7 and in SCHLOSSER, Aus der Bilderwerkstatt der Renaissance, in: Jahrbuch der Kunhistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses, XXXI, 1913/14, pp. 67-135, here: pp. 73-86.

by a number of art historians, each of which was accompanied by an image of the scholar in question, but Schlosser was the only one to be portrayed in the company of a work of art. The image depicts Schlosser the art lover and connoisseur, and foregrounds the extent to which Schlosser's methodological polemics reflected the image he had of himself. Indeed, one might go further and view both the photograph and many of Schlosser's writings as a kind of performance, in which he foregrounded his identity as a connoisseur. Yet they mask deep ambivalences he harboured about his work as an art historian. In the 'Lebenskommentar' he wrote of the considerable wrench involved when he was appointed to the chair of art history at the University in 1922, for it necessitated giving up direct intimate contact with works of art.⁶¹ Indeed, foreshadowing André Malraux's later famous commentary, Schlosser suggested that it was the reliance on copies and reproductions that contributed to art historians' tendency to abstract analysis, for they had lost the concrete immediacy of art objects.⁶² What is most striking about this, however, is that it bore very little relation to Schlosser's practice as an art historian.

As noted already, Schlosser was renowned for his pioneering work in a number of areas – collecting, musical instruments, wax effigies, literary sources – but common to all these and other publications is that the subject matter had nothing to do with art, as he defined it. The only artist he studied in any depth was Lorenzo Ghiberti; apart from bringing out the critical edition of *I Commentarii* Schlosser also wrote a monograph on him, but the book was incomplete on his death and was only published posthumously in 1941, as if to symbolise a reluctance to address directly the life and work of an artist.⁶³ Moreover, for all that he regretted losing the immediacy of the art object once he relinquished his position at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, much of Schlosser's writing about the objects in the collections exemplified the formulaic and dry art historical scholarship he so decried. Some of this was due to the professional demands of the Museum, in which he was required to inventurise and catalogue the objects in his care, according to well established museological protocols. Indeed, one of his more important achievements in this context was his organisation of the

⁶¹ 'Was in dieser musealen Tätigkeit für mich von besonderer Wichtigkeit geworden ist, was die dauernde Verbindung mit dem Einzelkunstwerk.' *What came to be of particular importance for me in my museum activity was the connection to the individual work of art.* SCHLOSSER, *Lebenskommentar*, p. 113.

⁶² Ibid, p. 20. A. MALRAUX, *Le musée imaginaire*, Geneva 1947.

⁶³ J. SCHLOSSER, *Leben und Meinungen des florentinischen Bildhauers Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Basel 1941.

musical instruments in the Museum into a discrete collection.⁶⁴ Yet even on those occasions when he was not constrained by such requirements, his writings seldom exhibit the aesthetic engagement he saw as so central to the task of art history. In 1901, for example, Schlosser published an album of selected objects from the collection of small bronzes in his care. This exercise provided the opportunity to explore their aesthetic qualities, and as he later noted, this was one of many writings in which he was trying to make the collections of the Museum accessible to a wider audience. There is little evidence, however, of a serious attempt to convey the sense of aesthetic pleasure he took in the objects; instead, the album offers dry positivistic accounts of the objects, merely giving their provenance as well as other ‘external’ historical facts.⁶⁵ In addition, for all his criticisms of the abstractions of Riegl and others, his writing is replete with the same kinds of generalisations, often deployed with less rigour than those of his predecessors. His late essay ‘Magistra Latinitas und Magistra Barbaritas,’ for example, which can be interpreted as, in part, a response to Wilhelm Worringer’s wild and sweeping assertions about the national character and modernity of Gothic art, is constructed around a range of vague generalisations about Latinity, barbarity, northernness and southernness in art.⁶⁶ Even when Schlosser did offer more detailed readings of individual works of art in the collections, he relied on cursory references to general stylistic notions. His essay on the late fifteenth-century *Vanitas* group (by Michel Erhart or Jörg Syrlin) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Figure 2), for example, offered some sensitive aesthetic descriptions, but they are coupled with reference to vague notions of ‘southern sensuality’ (‘südlicher Sinnlichkeit’) or to the opposition between ‘northern German-Franconian’ and ‘southern German-Austrian’ styles.⁶⁷ It is not merely that these terms are problematic – they would certainly have done little to make the sculpture any more meaningful to anyone but a specialist – but they also involve the kind of generalisations of which Schlosser was so critical. Often, too, his comments were so densely interwoven with citations from other authors to the extent that is challenging to disentangle his voice from those of others. His

⁶⁴ J. SCHLOSSER, *Kleiner Führer durch die Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente*, Vienna 1922.

⁶⁵ SCHLOSSER, *Album ausgewählter Gegenstände der kunstindustriellen Sammlung des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, Vienna 1901.

⁶⁶ SCHLOSSER, *Magistra Latinitas und Magistra Barbaritas*, in: *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Abteilung*, 1937. W. WORRINGER, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, Munich, 1927.

⁶⁷ SCHLOSSER, *Vanitas: ein deutsches Bildwerk des 15. Jahrhunderts* (1922) in: SCHLOSSER, *Präludien*, pp. 373-79.

short essay on Cellini's Salt Cellar, for example, is in large part an extended sequence of quotations from Cellini's Autobiography.⁶⁸ His essay on style and language conformed to the same pattern; substantive points are frequently lost amidst a welter of direct quotations from, and allusions to, authors from the German philosophical tradition since Kant. On the one hand this betrays a scholar deeply immersed in the tradition of humanist scholarship who makes no concessions to the reader. It can also be read as a kind of ostentatious performance, a demonstration of Schlosser's own possession of *Bildung*. One might also, however, read Schlosser as using these authors as props, signalling a kind of weakness, as if he was unable to formulate his own arguments at length and was compelled to rely instead on others.

These features of his writing can thus be read as indicative of a basic flaw or inconsistency, but an alternative interpretation would be to understand them as symptoms of a sense of crisis and uncertainty over how to meet the challenge Schlosser had set himself as an art historian. They instantiate a deeper introspection over the purposes of the discipline. In the 'Lebenskommentar' Schlosser described art history as being in a state of crisis, one which was visible in the turn to the normative and quasi-scientific formal categories he would later so forcefully dismiss. Of particular interest is the fact that the text also mentions Schlosser's *own* crisis, his radical doubt and self-criticism as to what being an art historian might entail. For Schlosser that doubt was resolved when he discovered the work of Croce and Vossler, and the tenacity with which he championed their work, which included several unsuccessful attempts to nominate Croce for membership of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, demonstrates the personal investment he placed in their work. However, one might argue that this sense of crisis was only partly addressed: Schlosser's uncertainty as to the form art historical *ekphrasis* might take never disappeared.

Schlosser's choice of topics on the margins of art history, 'auxiliary' topics such as musical instruments, the history of the Kunst- and Wunderkammer, or the reception history of Byzantine art, to cite another example, can thus be seen as an avoidance tactic, testament to his reservations about meeting the impossible demands placed by his vision of art. What, after all, was Schlosser's study of wax portraiture, for all its conceptual brilliance, if not a 'Sprachgeschichte' of a particular form, in which individual 'style' was submerged within the ahistorical *language* of veristic wax portrait representation? Indeed, one of the most curious

⁶⁸ SCHLOSSER, Das Salzfaß des Benvenuto Cellini (1921), in: SCHLOSSER, Präludien, pp. 340-56.

aspects of that work is the final chapter in which he expresses regret at the rise of the Renaissance division between high and low art (and the relegation of wax portraiture as a minor art form), as if contradicting the hierarchy he so strongly advocated in the essay on style.⁶⁹ The inconsistency between the 1910 study of wax and his later article on language may be attributed to the period of time between the two publications – some 25 years - but, equally, it may be seen as a sign of Schlosser's ambivalence. For as an art historian he had to face a fundamental question: if art is driven by the incommensurable creative achievements of monadic artistic geniuses, what kind of historical narrative can one construct, other than a mere chronicle? As Michael Podro has since stated, 'Schlosser's insistence on separating the language of art from distinguished artistic performance, led him with Croce to regard that performance as transcending what could be historically studied. In this way Schlosser had no model by which to relate the history of the language of art to the works which were created *in* the language.'⁷⁰

The reluctance to write about art in anything but the most schematic terms was therefore due to Schlosser's tacit recognition of the contradictory nature of his claims; all he could offer instead was a kind of negative theology, an ill-defined space that might be occupied by a future art history, but one whose contours remained to be defined.⁷¹ Such indeterminacy was also linked to a sense of the aesthetic as a domain that could not be grasped *as such*. As Christopher Wood has recently suggested, Schlosser practiced a kind of 'indirect' art history characterized by an 'unwillingness to bring art into resolution.'⁷²

Yet even in Schlosser's own lifetime this approach was being questioned, most remarkably of all, by Robert Longhi. Schlosser was a great admirer of Longhi's ability to evoke the aesthetic impact of art works through his richly metaphorical and suggestive rhetoric.⁷³ Yet Longhi also recognized that their aesthetic qualities do not exist in isolation in the manner in

⁶⁹ SCHLOSSER, Ausgang der alten Wachsbildnerei: Ihre Ächtung durch die Ästhetik des Klassizismus in: SCHLOSSER, Geschichte der Porträtbildnerei in Wachs, pp. 241-58.

⁷⁰ M. PODRO, The Critical Historians of Art, London and New Haven 1982, p. 212.

⁷¹ I owe the term 'negative theology' to Hubert Locher.

⁷² C. WOOD, Source and Text, Res 63/64, 2013, p. 19.

⁷³ Schlosser referred to Longhi's 'Baroque' style of writing as 'schlagkräftig und bildhaft.' SCHLOSSER, Künstlerprobleme der Frührenaissance, in: Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 214.5, 1933, p. 5.

which Schlosser envisaged. His most extensive statement to this effect was in his famous programmatic essay in the first issue of *Paragone*, the journal he founded in 1950. There he stated:

The work of art, from a Greek vase to the Sistine Chapel ceiling, is always a masterpiece in exquisitely relative terms. The work of art does not exist in isolation, it is always a relation to something else. To begin with: at the very least, a relation to another work of art. A work of art isolated in the world would not even be understood as a human product, but would be guarded with reverence and horror, like magic, like a taboo, like the work of God or of a magician, not of man ... the sense of a relation makes a critical response necessary. The response includes not only the connection of one work to another, but that also between the work and the world, society, the economy, religion, politics and whatever else takes place.⁷⁴

This essay was published some time after Schlosser's death, and with its mention of the relations between the work of art and wider contexts it foreshadows the growing embrace of the social history of art of the postwar era. But its roots go back to some of Longhi's first writings from the 1920s and earlier, in which he stressed the central role played by the relation *between* works of art in informing judgements as to their aesthetic character, indeed the *dependence* of judgment on such relations.⁷⁵

Philosophical Questions

⁷⁴ 'L'opera d'arte, dal vaso dell'artigiano greco alla Volta Sistina, è sempre un capolavoro squisitamente 'relativo.' L'opera non sta mai da sola, è sempre un rapporto. Per cominciare: almeno un rapporto con un'altra opera d'arte. Un'opera sola al mondo, non sarebbe neppure intesa come produzione umana, ma guardata con reverenza o con orrore, come magia, come tabù, come opera di Dio o dello stregone, non dell'uomo ... È dunque il senso dell'apertura di rapporto che dà necessità alla risposta critica. Risposta che non involge soltanto il nesso tra opera e opera, ma tra opera e mondo, socialità, economia, religione, politica e quant'altro occorra.' Roberto Longhi, *Proposte per una critica d'arte*, in: *Paragone*, 1, 1950, p. 1.

⁷⁵ 'Porre la relazione fra ... due opere è anche porre il concetto della storia dell'arte, come almeno l'intendo io, e cioè null'altro che la storia dello svolgimento degli stili figurative ...' *To establish the relation between two works is also to establish the concepts of art history, as I at least understand it, that is, nothing other than the development of figurative styles ...* LONGHI, *Breve ma veridica storia dell'arte italiana*, Florence 1980, p. 36. These were notes originally written 1913-1914.

The difference between Longhi and Schlosser might be read as little more than a historic divergence between two art historians and of little relevance to the present, but it touches on questions that continue to have philosophical resonance, and that still recur in debates over art historical method. For in essence, Schlosser was articulating a peculiarly modern problem: the difficulties besetting aesthetic description and its relation to history. In order to explore this dimension to his thinking it is necessary to turn to the Romantic aesthetic tradition after Kant; it provides the key to understanding the wider philosophical stakes, in relation both to Schlosser's theory of interpretation and his theory of the subject on which it was built. The key figures in this regard are Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

I noted earlier that Schlosser referred to his youthful enthusiasm for 'meinen geliebten Schelling,' and in the essay on style he also relates 'Stilgeschichte' to the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).⁷⁶ These two authors provide the framework within which we may approach the philosophical underpinning of Schlosser's thought. In his lectures on textual hermeneutics and criticism Schleiermacher argued that a text is *both* the individual expression of a subject *and* the operation of a general symbolic system; it cannot be understood simply by reference to the system of language (what Schleiermacher termed the grammatical dimension) since it is the articulation of the contingent thoughts of the speaking subject, but, equally, every utterance presupposes a language system. As Schleiermacher noted:

Der Einzelne ist in seinem Denken durch die (gemeinsame) Sprache bedingt und kann nur die Gedanken denken, welche in seiner Sprache schon ihre Bezeichnung haben. Ein anderer neue Gedanke könnte nicht mitgeteilt werden, wenn nicht auf schon in der Sprache bestehende Beziehungen bezogen. Dies beruht darauf, daß das Denken eine inneres Sprechen ist. Daraus erhellt, aber positiv, daß die Sprache das Fortschreiten des Einzelnen im Denken bedingt. Denn die Sprache ist nicht nur ein Complexus einzelner Vorstellungen, sondern auch ein System von der Verwandtschaft der Vorstellungen.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ SCHLOSSER, *Lebenskommentar*, p. 4; Über 'Stilgeschichte' und 'Sprachgeschichte,' p. 17.

⁷⁷ *The individual is determined in his thought by the common, language and can think only the thoughts which already have their designation in his language. Another, new, thought could not be communicated if not in reference to relationships that already exist in his language. This is based on the fact that thinking is an inner speaking. From this one can conclude, positively, that language conditions the progress of the individual in*

Language thus comprises two moments, the ‘psychological’ and the ‘grammatical,’ and understanding consists of attention to their being-in-one-another (Ineinandersein).

Schleiermacher’s outline points not only toward the task of the interpreter but also towards a philosophy of the self, in that it viewed the subject neither as a point of absolute origin nor as merely an ‘effect’ of the speaking system of language (an idea associated with thinkers ranging from Nietzsche to later writers such as Lacan, Foucault and Derrida). As such it stood in opposition to the position advocated by Schelling, for whom the transcendental subject remained a key concept. The distinctiveness of Schleiermacher’s view of the dialectical relation between subject and language has made his work an object of considerable critical interest in recent decades, most notably, in Manfred Frank’s interrogation of the legacy of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of interpretation.⁷⁸

In order to understand the philosophical stakes involved it is worth rehearsing some of the difficulties presented by the legacy of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.⁷⁹ Specifically, Kant had described consciousness in terms of the metaphor of reflection; the subject is a continual process of self-reflection, and as such it is split into a perceiving subject and the object of its own reflection. As Kant acknowledged, given the dependence of such reflection on forms of intuition and categories of cognition, such a process never reveals the noumenal self *in itself*, only its phenomenal *appearance*. The self may be the free and spontaneous ground of knowledge, but it only *knows* itself as an object subject to the conditions governing all knowledge. The self therefore cannot be a direct *object* of knowledge; all that is available to introspection is a phenomenal version of itself. A further issue is raised, too, for even if the self can only ever know itself in a conditioned way, it is open to question how it recognizes the *object* of such introspective reflection to be itself. How does the subject see itself in the mirror of self-reflection?

thought. For language is not just a complex of single representations, but also a system based on the relations between the representations. F. SCHLEIERMACHER, *Hermeneutik und Kritik, mit besonderer Beziehung auf das neue Testament*, ed., Friedrich Lücke, Berlin 1838, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Key early works by Frank include M. FRANK, *Was ist Neostukturalismus?*, Frankfurt am Main 1984; *Das Individuelle Allgemeine: Textstrukturierung und Textinterpretation nach Schleiermacher*, Frankfurt am Main 1985 and *Die Unhintergebarkeit von Individualität: Reflexionen über Subjekt, Person und Individuum aus Anlass ihrer "postmodernen" Totklärung*, Frankfurt am Main 1986.

⁷⁹ I. KANT, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main 1974.

Kant sought to overcome this division between the freely *cognizing* subject and the *cognized* subject constrained by the necessary conformity to the rational laws through recourse to aesthetic judgement as a bridge between the two.⁸⁰ For his heirs this remained a central issue – Schelling referred to it as the supreme philosophical problem – but deemed Kant’s solution inadequate and developed alternatives.⁸¹ One was to posit the idea of primitive self-awareness prior to conceptual cognition. Thinkers such as Fichte, Friedrich Jacobi and even the young Schleiermacher posited the idea of intuition (‘*Anschauung*’) or feeling (‘*Gefühl*’) to denote a pre-reflective self-knowledge that also grounded knowledge of the world. Schelling instead posited the idea of an absolute subject grounded in productive nature and also gave a privileged place to art as the expression of it; the self cannot be made the conditioned object of conceptual knowledge, but, Schelling claimed, it can be *symbolized* in the work of art.⁸² Schleiermacher, in contrast, came to relinquish the Romantic attachment to the subject as the unconditioned source of knowledge, advancing instead a notion of the self as both free *and* linguistically conditioned, a position in which he sought to maintain its autonomy vis-à-vis language, but without lapsing into the dangers of solipsism associated with the absolute I espoused by Schelling.

Given his insistence on the unconditioned nature of artistic creativity, it is perhaps clear which of these two possibilities Schlosser adopted. The monadic artist is the latest incarnation of Schelling’s productive absolute I. Schlosser’s reluctance directly to describe the work of art *qua* aesthetic artefact suggests a tacit compliance, too, with Schelling’s view of art as the symbol (rather than the conceptual representation) of the unconditioned. As such, Schlosser’s thinking was immersed in what Christoph Menke has referred to as the aesthetics of negation, the central tradition of post-Kantian thinking on art in which the unconditioned

⁸⁰ I. KANT, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, Frankfurt am Main 1974.

⁸¹ ‘Das erste Problem der Philosophie läßt sich also auch so ausdrücken: etwas zu finden, was schlechterdings nicht als Ding gedacht werden kann. Aber ein solches ist nur das Ich, und umgekehrt, das Ich ist, was an sich nichobjektiv ist.’ *The first problem of philosophy can be expressed as follows: to find something that cannot be thought of as a thing. But only the I is like that and, conversely, the I is that which is non-objective in itself.* SCHELLING, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, cited in FRANK, *Einführung in der frühromantische Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main 1989, p. 157.

⁸² F. SCHELLING, *Philosophie der Kunst*, Darmstadt 1990. See, too, A. ZERBST, *Schelling und die bildende Kunst: zum Verhältnis von kunstphilosophischen System und konkreter Werkkenntnis*, Munich 2011.

ground of knowledge can only ever be symbolized aesthetically but not represented conceptually.⁸³ Schlosser was, of course, not addressing such philosophical questions directly, much less did he adopt the broader theoretical and metaphysical commitments entailed in Schelling's work. Nevertheless, the contradictions in his work indicate not simply inconsistencies – although this is also the case – but also his wrestling with the problems of aesthetic representation.

This issue has never entirely disappeared in art history, and it has frequently been bound up with the critique of art historical categories in a manner comparable to Schlosser's championing of the singular. Hence, there have been various calls for a renewal of art history as a *poetic* practice. One strategy for exploring such art historical poetics has been that of Mieke Bal, who has stressed the radical undecidability of artistic meaning. As Bal has noted, 'The point is ... to offer the speculative possibility of demonstrating polysemy in principle.'⁸⁴ Bal's sentiment was a commonplace in the semiotics of the 1980s and 1990s, but it also served to underline a critique of the art historical habit of locating works of art in formal and iconological lineages, and historical sequences: 'iconography ... construes the antecedent as a sounding board against which the posterior visual work can stand out in its difference, the narrative of anteriority uses the prior text or image as a measuring stick.'⁸⁵ This robs the work of art of its originality, for it 'defeats the point of visual art which is not to reiterate but to innovate, to offer experiences and insights, sights and sites that we did not as yet possess.'⁸⁶ Bal uses the language of semiology, but at root this is a reworking of the older aesthetic dilemma addressed by Schlosser.

This critique of iconographical rationalisation has gained particular force with the 're-discovery' of the work of Aby Warburg, in particular, his concern with the capacity of primitive visual images to exert psychological force across vast spans of time. This 'afterlife' ('Nachleben') of the expressive pathos formulae of classical displaces the linear time of art

⁸³ C. MENKE, *Die Souveränität der Kunst: Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida*, Frankfurt am Main 1991.

⁸⁴ M. BAL, *Reading Rembrandt*, Cambridge 1991, p. 73.

⁸⁵ M. BAL, *Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object*, *Oxford Art Journal*, 22.2, 1999, p. 116.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 117.

history with the constant possibility of the irruption of archaic social and cultural memories.⁸⁷ The search for iconographical antecedents runs aground, for the orderly chains of symbols and motifs identified by traditional art history are broken by the return of the repressed of the cultural imaginary. This model has been taken up by Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel with the notion of an ‘anachronic’ art history, that privileges temporal and historical instabilities and disruptions.⁸⁸ However, perhaps the most forceful exponent of this criticism has been Didi-Huberman, who has particularly focused on the legacy of Panofsky. For Didi-Huberman Warburg explored the possibility of an ‘impure time.’ In contrast, Panofsky:

ended up trying to eradicate the impurity, to resolve it, subsume it into an ordered schema that reestablishes the yearning of art history for aesthetic golden ages (the Renaissance was one) and reintroduces the enforcement by art history of coherent periods and ‘systems of reference.’⁸⁹

This laid down a template for subsequent art history that has persisted to the present, manifest in a compulsion to submit works to art historical interpretation, to ‘fix’ their meaning. At the heart of Didi-Huberman’s criticism is a basic epistemological point, for he argues that contemporary art history is still dominated by a ‘preference for contextualist (localized) history’ that ‘results from an eagerness for convenience—for information that can be coped with, labeled, managed, packaged.’ Panofsky’s creation of an interpretative ‘system’ – his famous triad of pre-iconographic, iconographic and iconological analysis – was designed to minimise the possibilities of semantic slippage or indeterminacy. In its place Didi-Huberman calls for a ‘capacity to tolerate and deal with an absence of differentiable periods and episteme (to live with an oceanic, unanalyzable unity, lacking beginning, end, and formulable meaning) ...’⁹⁰ The rhetoric may be radically different, but the sentiments can, again, be seen as the descendants of Schlosser’s espousal of the monadic artwork. As such they are vulnerable to the same kinds of criticisms and weaknesses that haunted Schlosser’s work: what kind of a historical narrative can we construct if we replace the orderly chain of

⁸⁷ A. S. WARBURG, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike*, ed. Horst Bredekamp and Michael Diers, Berlin 1998.

⁸⁸ C. WOOD and A. NAGEL, *Anachronic Renaissance*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

⁸⁹ G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Artistic Survival Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time*, *Common Knowledge*, 9.2, 2003, p. 280.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 285.

Panofsky's iconology with the 'oceanic unanalyzable unity' of Didi-Huberman? Under such conditions, what makes art history more than the articulation of personal aesthetic response? What prevents art historical analysis from being mere performance, a matter of individual rhetorical display, rather than a collective enterprise with shared protocols of interpretation and argumentation?⁹¹

One can pursue this issue further and invoke the highly influential and much discussed essay on aesthetic categories by the American philosopher Kendal Walton.⁹² Schlosser and the tradition of thought he represents rely on an opposition between the artwork as aesthetic artefact and the conceptual categories employed in art historical criticism and interpretation. Walton, in contrast, suggests that this is a false opposition, inasmuch as aesthetic judgement is itself dependent on prior conceptualization of the type of work being judged. Hence, Walton asks, 'why don't we say that [a marble bust of a Roman emperor] resembles and represents a perpetually motionless man, of uniform (marble) color, who is severed at the chest?' The answer is that the 'bust's uniform color, motionlessness, and abrupt ending at the chest are standard properties relative to the category of bust' and hence are judged within those terms.⁹³ Conversely, Walton argues, if it is not possible to attribute an artwork to a particular category, or if it so transgresses the norms of existing categories as to put into question the applicability of the category, it may be impossible to identify its aesthetic properties since there is no way of doing so. An unintentional illustration of Walton's argument can be found in T. J. Clark's discussion of the extremely negative responses to Manet's *Olympia* when it was first exhibited.⁹⁴ For the hostility of contemporary critics to the painting stemmed from their inability to pass relevant aesthetic judgements. It so contravened norms associated with the category of the nude that critics were at a loss as to how to classify it and therefore describe it. Walton was writing in the context of anglo-american philosophy of art, and thus makes no reference to the Romantic aesthetic tradition to which Schlosser was heir, but his argument foregrounds the extent to which aesthetic values are relational properties. The history of art is a system of differences and similarities; *contra* Schlosser, it

⁹¹ M. RAMPLEY, *The Poetics of the Image: Art History and the Rhetoric of Interpretation*, Marburger Jahrbuch der Kunstgeschichte, 35, 2008, pp. 7-31.

⁹² K. WALTON, *Categories of Art*, *The Philosophical Review* 79.3, 1970, pp. 334-67.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 345.

⁹⁴ T. J. CLARK, *Olympia's Choice*, in: CLARK, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London, 1985, pp. 79-115.

may be entirely legitimate to refer to the ‘michelangelo-esque’ qualities of Donatello, or the ‘donatello-esque’ qualities of Michelangelo, for it is through such comparisons that we gain an approximation of the historical and aesthetic significance of the artists in question. If, instead, the history of art consisted of pure singularities, it would not be a history of anything.

Nevertheless, Schlosser was surely correct, too, in his reservations about the impact of ‘theory,’ for he was trying to express his concerns about the dangers of what might be referred to as ‘top-down’ approach to art.⁹⁵ What I mean here is deductive inquiry, the theoretically-driven interpretation of works of art that consists of the application of a particular theory that deploys individual works of art to ‘illustrate’ or confirm the prior theoretical position that, in effect, reduces them to mere tokens. Schlosser did not describe it in these terms, but he was edging towards the now familiar hermeneutical point about the need for interpretative understanding to consist in the fusion of horizons of interpreter and their object.⁹⁶ The crisis he experienced derived from the fact that he never managed to formulate an image of what such a fusion might look like.

Conclusion

Reflection on and analysis the past of art history is now a well-established topic of inquiry. This edition of the *Jarbuch* dedicated to Schlosser is testament to that fact. Yet there remains the recurring question as to its purpose and aim. We may reconstruct the arguments of past scholars, but given that their theories have mostly long been superseded, such reconstruction is of limited value unless its significance can be articulated. Schlosser is a marked illustration of this, for his performance as the cultivated *bourgeois* art lover and scholar makes him seem all the more removed from the concerns of the present. Yet even though we may have little directly in common with Schlosser the Viennese art historian, this article has sought to demonstrate that he was wrestling with a set of problems that are still central to how art

⁹⁵ D. BORDWELL, Contemporary Film Theory and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory, in: *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, Madison 1996, pp. 3-36.

⁹⁶ ‘Zum wirklichen Verstehen gehört (es), die Begriffe einer historischen Vergangenheit so wiederzugewinnen, daß sie zugleich unser eigenes Begreifen mit enthalten. Wir nannten das ... die Horizonverschmelzung’ *True understanding consists of retrieving the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they encompass our conceptions at the same time. We called this the fusion of horizons.* H. G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in: GADAMER, *Gesammelte Werke*, Tübingen 2010, p. 380.

history defines itself today. How does one locate the work of art in social, cultural and other contexts while respecting its aesthetic autonomy? What sort of shape should the resulting historical narrative take? We may find Schlosser's response to such questions unconvincing, but his criticisms of much art historical practice are not so easily dismissed. Even efforts in the present to foreground the singularity of the work of art are often elaborated on the basis of a formidable theoretical apparatus that thereby undercuts their substantive claims. Re-reading Schlosser reminds us of this fact, perhaps.

Schlosser has never been associated with a particular school of art historical thought, unlike many of his Viennese colleagues, but this was not due to lack of curiosity. Instead, it was a sign of his reservations concerning the hazards of grand system-building; indeed, if we set aside some of the more strident rhetoric we find in Schlosser a rather introspective and uncertain figure. As such he typified what he referred to as the crisis in art history, that condition of ambivalence that has been a recurrent feature of the discipline; sensitive to its contradictions and tensions, wary of the problems of defining a method or 'system.' For all his identification with the artistic cultures of the past, for all his performing as the cultivated Viennese bourgeois, Schlosser emerges as a notably modern writer, trying to deal with distinctly modern and contemporary problems. Although expressed in an idiom that may no longer resonate, his preoccupations are still ours.